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Sylvia Ashton-Warner: Reclaiming Personal Meaning in Literacy Teaching

NANCY S. THOMPSON

For many of you, Sylvia Ashton-Warner needs no introduction. You might have read *Teacher*, her book on teaching the concept of literacy to Maori children in New Zealand. Or perhaps you know *Spinster*, the earlier fictional presentation of that work, taken from her teaching journals through the 1940s and 50s. If you haven't read any of her work, I want to take this opportunity to introduce Warner to a new generation of teachers. After coming to know her work during my graduate studies in the 1960s, I have passed on *Teacher* to many young teachers, including my secondary preservice students. I hope my article will

stimulate you to read or reread this book. A creative woman who brought her art into her teaching, Ashton-Warner's penetrating engagement with her environment produced a vision of how to work with the learners in her Maori New Zealand context that is inspiring even today in our multicultural environment.

Through my own history as a thirty-nine-year veteran of literacy teaching, Ashton-Warner's work has been one of my guides. She struck a responsive chord in me as she has in many teachers throughout the world. Those who respond know instinctively—without the aid of experimental designs or statistical “proof”—the truth in her writing. In my research journey—including several trips to New Zealand, to libraries there and in the United States that hold archives of her work, and interviews with people who knew and worked with her—I have found that Sylvia Ashton-Warner left much of her imagination and wisdom in her writings, both published and unpublished.

Why Sylvia Ashton-Warner?

Dinner Party artist Judy Chicago, who created a room-sized museum exhibit of a large triangular-

shaped table with ceramic place settings for important women who have contributed to our history, identified Sylvia Ashton-Warner as one of the most influential women of all time. Ashton-Warner gave us an early model for multicultural teaching. “Trans-cultural” was her term for communication between cultures that forms a two-way bridge back and forth, each affecting each, rather than a one-way colonial influence of the dominant Pakeha (European) culture on the “Other” Maori culture (“Topics: Teaching and Conserving a Black Child”).

From Sylvia Ashton-Warner's writing, we have a record of a mid-century education system foregrounding bicultural education as a result of New Zealand's effort to integrate its large Maori population (about 15 percent). The small size of the country and the resulting manageability of a national education system allowed for coherent, centralized progressive education. Within this larger context, a separate Maori school system existed. It was in this system that Ashton-Warner and her husband Keith Henderson worked in isolated areas of the country with Maori pupils beginning in the late 1930s. Through the 1940s, she worked out her methods of introducing literacy to Maori children, who came to school from a home culture in which

literacy was not central to their way of life. In the isolation of country schools, Ashton-Warner developed the methods that she published in New Zealand journals during the early 1950s, in her novel *Spinster* in 1958, and finally in her widely-read book *Teacher* in 1963. The idea at the centerpiece of this work she named the “Key Vocabulary,” which is based on her organic philosophy of teaching.

What she called her “scheme” for working in the New Zealand bicultural context may be, in some very basic ways, universally adaptable to intercultural or transcultural education for the new millennium. Organic teaching requires the teacher to listen to the pupils, to truly hear them and encourage what is important to them, and to use that as the working material for teaching and learning. This concept, Ashton-Warner asserts, embodies the kind of attitude necessary for building transcultural bridges for sharing understanding of cultures, ultimately a possible direction leading to peace in our shrinking global village.

The Organic Philosophy as the Basis for Whole-Language Teaching

Long before the term “whole language” became a caption for an educational approach, Sylvia Ashton-Warner was leading us to practice the whole language teaching that many believe emerged from New Zealand. Her organic philosophy explained below was essential groundwork for the “language experience” approach, influenced by the British participants in the 1966 Dartmouth Conference and recorded most memorably by John Dixon in *Growth through English* as the “personal growth model.” All of this influence later folded into the movement of whole language teaching, so named by Goodman at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, that is still very influential—though under attack—in the United States and other English teaching countries. The organic phi-

losophy expressed in *Teacher* can be seen as a spark that ignited the whole language movement.

The organic method emerges from the immediate conditions of the context; its working material grows out of whatever situation is at hand. In *Teacher* Ashton-Warner explains the core of her vision of an organic approach to teaching:

Children have two visions, the inner and the outer. Of the two the inner vision is brighter.

I hear that in other infant rooms widespread illustration is used to introduce the reading vocabulary to a five-year-old, a vocabulary chosen by adult educationists. I use pictures, too, to introduce the reading vocabulary, but they are pictures of the inner vision and the captions are chosen by the children themselves. True, the picture of the outer, adult-chosen pictures can be meaningful and delightful to children; but it is the captions of the mind pictures that have the power and the light. For whereas the illustrations perceived by the outer eye cannot be other than interesting, the illustrations seen by the inner eye are organic . . . (32)

In the following letter, Ashton-Warner identifies the *opposite* of organic:

Dear Miss Gresham,

I'm writing to acknowledge the gift of a word you gave me last Thursday, April 11. A word I have been looking for, for eight years. I asked the Infant Mistresses of Tauranga for a word to encompass the reading that was not organic. You gave me, with startling precision, the word “directed.” (Unpublished letter.)

Organically speaking, instead of *directing* the pupils to words from *outside* themselves as material for learning

to read, Ashton-Warner finds her material in the minds of the children:

I'm often asked in letters what I mean by “organic.” I mean that the original content of our child's mind is to him what the heart and lungs, kidneys and such are to our child's body . . . indispensable organs . . . You identify them in organic teaching and in particular by the Key Vocabulary. (“The Nature of a Teacher”)



Sylvia Ashton-Warner.
Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library
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Aotearoa. Photographed by H. G. du Faur.
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The Key Vocabulary: Practicing Organic Teaching for Whole Language Learning

Ashton-Warner's Key Vocabulary is a method of tapping into each child's personal, emotion-laden mental images, what she calls their "native imagery," and using "captions" of those images as the first words for teaching children to read. Her application of the Key Vocabulary introduced a way of using the content of Maori children's minds to help them penetrate the unfamiliar concept of literacy. The working material for learning grows naturally out of the environment and the learners in that environment. Ashton-Warner explains:

... the key words [carry] their own illustrations in the mind, vivid and powerful pictures which none of us could possibly draw for [the children]—since in the first place we can't see them and in the second because they are so alive with an organic life that the external pictorial representation of them is beyond the frontier of possibility. We can do no more than supply the captions. (*Teacher* 39)

Long before the term "whole language" became a caption for an educational approach, Sylvia Ashton-Warner was leading us to practice the whole language teaching that many believe emerged from New Zealand.

In her early work teaching Maori children to read from what she identifies as American "Janet and John" readers (a variation on the Dick and Jane series), Ashton-Warner found that her pupils could not understand the concept of what reading *is*. They didn't catch onto the idea that the marks on a page stand for the images in their minds. However, when she had a conversation with each child to find out what was on the child's

mind at the moment, she could extract from each individual a word that carried strong emotional significance. This word, no matter how long or complicated, was the one she printed on a large piece of cardboard, helping the child learn to pronounce the word and trace it with fingers on the large card. It passed the test as a true Key Vocabulary word if the child could recognize and read it the next day. The children would retrieve their own cardboard words from the community pile and practice reading their words to one another. Even these young children, Ashton-Warner insisted, could help one another learn by working together in pairs or groups.

Her insight was that the words children speak out of their emotional lives are accompanied by vivid mental images; it was these images that supplied the meaning to the words, and these emotionally charged words were the ones for teaching the concept of reading as naming those meaningful mental images. Like Helen Keller, the children learned the concept that language is the naming, or "captioning" as Ashton-Warner called it, of the bright images that live in the mind. Once her Maori pupils understood this concept, introduced through their own personal imagery, they caught on to reading and could then move successfully to and through the commercial readers.

Ashton-Warner presents the discovery of the Key Vocabulary as an inspired "moment" stretched over a lengthy period as it formed in her mind. In a riveting account in her novel *Spinster* (which made the *New York Times* best-seller list for several weeks when it was published), she recreates in words her lightning-illuminated discovery of the Key Vocabulary. The book reads like an unfolding mystery, as the teacher gets glimmers of this image-idea that is trying to take shape in her mind:

One day, when one of the children is reading from the Maori books, he comes to the line,

Kiss Mummie Goodbye, Ihaka.

"What's this word?" he asks.

" 'Kiss.' "

A strange excitement comes over him. He smirks, then laughs outright, says it again, then tugs at Patchy nearby and shows him. "That's 'kiss'," he says emotionally. "K-I-S-S."

Patchy lights up too in an extraordinary way. They both spell it. The reading is held up while others are called and told and I feel something has happened although I don't know what. . . .

Why this sudden impetus in the reading, I wonder, putting up the words from the imported books on the blackboard for the day? What's this power in a word like "kiss"?

... I see that this word is related to some feeling within them; some feeling that I have so far not touched. ...

"It's got some relation," I say [to the headmaster] "to a big feeling. I can't put my finger on it."

"Do you mean it's a caption?"

Caption! ... caption ...

Caption ... The whole question is floodlit. This word is the caption of a very big inner picture. ... a huge emotional picture. ... it is the caption of a mighty instinct: sex.

... it comes to me that there must be other captions of a like nature. Other captions carrying their own pictures in the mind ... Fear, for instance, the only instinct I know that is bigger than sex.

... What, I wonder ... are all the other captions and pictures? What terrible power there must be in words for little children if only we could tap and harness it!

... There must be many more words like this, analogous to these two; captions of other instincts, desires, resentments, horrors and passions. What are they? How do you get hold of them? How do your hands plunge into their heads and wrench them out? (178–81)

The delicate structure of the thought is shattered by interruptions ... A few days later, though, Ashton-Warner says:

... I see again the tower, rising in all its precariousness and delicacy; the tower of thought that I had lost. And on top of this tower I see this shape that has been hovering above me, ungraspable for two seasons: this *key*. And it is no longer mysterious and nebulous. It is as simple as my Little Ones. The whole system of infant room vocabulary flashes before the inner eye as though floodlit. ... I am realizing what this captioning of the inner world is. It's the vocabulary I've been after ... I christen it the Key Vocabulary. (189)

The organic approach to teaching literacy, then, begins with the learner's sense of meaning of the whole idea, such as a mind picture captioned by a word—the basic concept of literacy. Beginning with this *whole idea* provides meaning in the act of reading, as opposed to initially breaking language into phonetic parts that have no essential meaning to the child. This use of learners' own meaning-laden concepts is the basis of whole language teaching that can take into account their particular cultural backgrounds.

Adapting Organic Learning and Whole Language to Upper-Level Literacy Teaching

So what does this technique for teaching Maori children to read have to do with teaching middle, secondary, and college literacy? As a former secondary teacher and presently as a college freshman English teacher and a teacher of the teaching of writing, my interest in Ashton-Warner's work has led me to adapt her ideas to my own teaching. How can I suggest the use of the organic philosophy for middle and secondary teaching?

Like Helen Keller, the children
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Though whole language has made inroads principally in elementary teaching, the concept of organic teaching is applicable at any level because it takes as its working material whatever conditions exist in any particular teaching context. As Ashton-Warner says in her book about her experience teaching in the open-classroom movement in Aspen, Colorado, in the early 1970s, "The professional formula—'Release the native imagery of our child and use it for working material'—remains timeless, changeless and axiomatic, but the application of it needs constant variation" (*Spearpoint* 40). It is the possibility of that variation that makes the formula remain viable and malleable so that it can be shaped in a more personal organic approach to teaching literacy at different levels in different cultures.

As many schools in the US move to block scheduling, where we have more extended time to work with students, and as the national and state calls for smaller class sizes begin to take effect, we have a different kind of teaching situation from the fifty minute periods that often lend themselves best

to teacher-centered presentation. We need ways of organizing teaching to accommodate the situation for more learner-centered activity in our schoolrooms. One possibility is to extrapolate Ashton-Warner's organic idea of the Key Vocabulary and look at how it can be adapted to older learners. Instead of key vocabulary *words*, I suggest helping learners identify the key *idea-images* that carry great meaning for them and beginning with those as the basis for further learning.

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Through our own conversations with students, their conversations with peers in groupwork, and their freewritings and journal writings, our students identify the idea-images in their minds that carry intense meaning for them, much like the imagery Ashton-Warner tapped for the first reading words. In a way similar to Maori children, high school and college students coming from different cultural backgrounds as well as a multimedia culture are learning a new kind of literacy—academic literacy. In my writing classes at the college level, these key idea-images work as the source of an inquiry project—a subject the students are intensely interested in that they want to learn about through an extended, systematic study. One example that stands out in my memory is a young woman whose freewriting at the beginning of a semester led her to become aware of a problem with her boyfriend's abusive treatment as a key idea-image occupying her mind. From that beginning point, she worked through an inquiry project to learn about abuse and to express her learning in an extended research paper. Another student chronicled her grandmother's language and stories for the family by interviewing her grandmother and other family members. Later when I happened to see the grandmother's obituary in the newspaper, I fully realized the importance of this study for my student. For these students, these

were idea-images all lit with white light, like the key words Ashton-Warner helped her young pupils name. This is the light of emotion, the source of mental energy that fuels learning.

Classroom work can be organized for individuals or small groups or even the large group and need not be so emotionally based as the example above, though any intensely interesting subject will be emotionally appealing to the learner. We need only observe middle-school students who become almost obsessed with subjects, such as dinosaurs, that interest them. Whereas the traditional scheduling apportioned out time in a manner that keeps the teacher-centered model in place, a block schedule's longer period of ninety minutes gives us time to get students started on projects, to teach students how to manage their learning processes and how to work in group-teams to manage their individual learning. Though sometimes we find it difficult to manage students in groups, it's important to teach teamwork skill. It may be one of the most important abilities to have in a diverse culture, where we need to know and work with one another.

Group Inquiry Learning

This model of teaching is an adaptation of a group inquiry model. Group inquiry appropriates the advantages of individualized learning, while adding the component of the group as the means for learning how to learn when students talk about their learning processes with one another. Students' interest in one another's work is the impetus for motivating them to continue their learning.

Students meet in their small groups each week to report on what they are doing and bring up questions they are encountering as they move through their learning projects, while the teacher works one-on-one with students when possible. Also, sometime during the week, the teacher works with the whole large group as a means of guiding the process. Students write progress reports each week on what they have accomplished (reading notes, interview notes, rough drafts of papers written). The teacher can read these quickly as a way of keeping up with the progress of each student. Students keep a portfolio of work for assessment.

Work in small groups is the place where the classroom naturally and organically becomes multicultural. When students are expected to communicate meaningfully with one another, the

multicultural composition of the classroom plays a transcultural or intercultural role in that students must learn to know one another. Students' cultural orientations are an organic part of the choices they make for their inquiry projects, and their learning is more meaningful when this kind of personal interest is taken as the starting point. When students are personally and meaningfully involved in their learning, teachers, too, feel more meaning in their work.

Personalizing Teaching

For me, one of the problems with teaching is that it has been depersonalized. Like the corporate culture that moved in to overhaul our economy after the problems of the 1980s, education has become corporately run for efficiency and effectiveness. The textbook industry is a helpful partner, producing books and educational programs that are crafted to appeal broadly across many different cultural situations. Though in many ways this move is successful, the teacher's deep involvement in decision-making has been replaced by these "effective" materials that do much of the work for us. We can *buy* a good program. With adoption of programmatic systems, we become disengaged from the situation at hand. Instead of looking closely at the learners in our classroom to identify their interests and needs, we turn the work over to publishers. Perhaps this kind of impersonal disengagement creates the disconnection that results in burnout. As New Zealand educator Sue Middleton points out, "Like contemporary feminist educators and researchers, she [Sylvia Ashton-Warner] urged that we start with the personal—that we explore our native imagery" (1). Perhaps the most important of Ashton-Warner's accomplishments was to personalize literacy education, and, just as important, she did so in New Zealand's early bicultural educational context. She accomplished this by legitimizing the role of emotion—both in the teacher's teaching and in the learner's learning. Reaching into the mind of the child through personal communication, she was able to identify the child's feelings, interests, and knowledge upon which to build literacy learning. She states:

No time is too long spent talking to a child to find out his key words, the key that unlocks himself, for in them is the secret of reading, the realisation that words can have intense meaning. Words having no

emotional significance to him, no instinctive meaning, could be an imposition, doing him more harm than not teaching him at all. They may teach him that words mean nothing and that reading is undesirable. (*Teacher 44*)

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Her philosophy of organic teaching is relevant in the contemporary environment because it presents an attitude of creativity toward teaching—one that takes into account the need for emotional commitment to our work, which integrally includes the need to think transculturally in our great mix of cultures. Such an attitude can help teachers generate approaches at any level of education for integrating the personal knowledge of "our native imagery" into creative teaching practices. In this way we resist that which is negative about standardization in the present educational environment.

How to Get Better Acquainted with Sylvia Ashton-Warner

Sylvia Ashton-Warner's story is told through her own fiction, nonfiction, and autobiography. *Teacher* and *Spearpoint*, *Teacher in America* chronicle her teaching experience as nonfiction, while *Spinster* is the earliest presentation in the form of fiction. *Myself* is an earlier teaching journal presented as fiction. Her autobiography, *I Passed This Way*, stimulated New Zealand freelance writer Lynley Hood to write a biography, *Sylvia!*, along with a diary chronicling the writing of that biography, *Who Is Sylvia?*⁹ Ashton-Warner's other fiction explores her life and work: *Incense to Idols*, *Bell Call*, *Greenstone*, *Three*, and the posthumous *Stories from the River*.

Since the publication of Hood's 1988 biography, Ashton-Warner's work has come to be cited more and more often. Jane Tompkins gives Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* the recognition of being one of the four major influences on her recent work about teaching; Sue Middleton notes Ashton-Warner's work as a forming influence on her own; and I, too, have explored her work as a background influence in my articles and in a book-length study of her work (in progress). Sylvia Ashton-Warner is truly a woman of vision, and her work will continue to influence teachers for years to come.

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